

VZCZCXRO3042
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHKL #0828/01 2920252
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 190252Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3268
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 000828

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/19/2019

TAGS: PGOV ECON GTIP MY TH

SUBJECT: REALIST ISLAMIC POLITICS IN KELANTAN

REF: KL 417 (AMBASSADOR,S VISIT TO KELANTAN)

Classified By: POLCOUNS Brian McFeeters for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Kelantan, Malaysia's least-developed and most conservative Muslim state, has been governed by the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) for the last 20 years. Its relative poverty has led to jibes such as that from Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin on October 6 that Kelantan is proof that PAS can't govern. Disputing that charge, PAS Member of Parliament Wan Rahim, from the state capital Kota Bharu, told visiting Pol Counselor during an October 6 meeting that Kelantan's people are satisfied with the "religious nature" of life there, and are not seeking more rapid development. He characterized PAS's national strategy as a "realistic" effort to stick with the Peoples Alliance opposition coalition, which he thought could win the next national elections, to be held by March 2013 at the latest. Chief Minister of Kelantan and PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz (78) remains central to PAS's local vision of a pious Islamic society. This message is based and discussions that Pol Couns and Pol Staff had during a visit to Kelantan's capital, Kota Bharu, during October 5-7. End Summary.

PAS vs. UMNO

¶2. (SBU) Kelantan is Malaysia's case study in PAS rule, governed by the Islamic party from 1959 to 1977 (from 1972 to 1977 as part of a ruling National Front coalition) and again from 1990 to the present; PAS won 38 of the state's 45 parliamentary seats in March 2008. Over 90 percent Malay, Kelantan ranks last among Malaysia's 13 states in terms of economic development, in part because of its location, agrarian economy, and lack of a deep-water port. Its per capita GDP was estimated at 42 percent of the national average in 2000.

¶3. (C) In an October 6 meeting, PAS Member of Parliament (MP) from Kota Bharu Wan Rahim acknowledged that Kelantan's economic development has lagged, but he argued that Kelantanese like the state's lifestyle as it is, appreciating the "religious nature" instilled by Chief Minister and PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz. Young people leave the state to seek jobs in Kuala Lumpur or elsewhere, but their remittances to parents and relatives in Kelantan and frequent visits home raise local incomes, as shown by "five new cars parked in front of village houses" on some weekends. Rahim challenged those who criticize the state, including Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin, to see for themselves how conditions are improving, citing the recent opening of a Tesco hypermarket (UK-based wholesale chain) in Kota Bharu, which drew customers from as far away as northern Terengganu state.

¶4. (C) Surprisingly, Rahim did not make the opposition parties' usual argument that PAS-governed Kelantan lagged because the ruling National Front (BN) coalition denied the state financial resources, though he did mention that Kelantan is not getting its fair share of oil revenues. United Malays National Organization (UMNO) politicians were more frank about the economic consequences of opposition

control during an October 5 discussion. Former Deputy Chief Minister of Kelantan Ahmad Rastam (when BN held the state, 1978-1990), said UMNO's loss of power was Kelantan's loss, because UMNO had sketched bold plans to develop the state's infrastructure and its links to nearby Pahang and Perak. Instead, not mentioned by Rastam, an east coast highway that was supposed to reach Kota Bharu was never finished after PAS regained the state.

15. (C) Rastam said he had trouble understanding why voters hadn't expelled PAS for mismanagement since even an Islamic lifestyle required money, but he ruefully acknowledged that BN could not hope to regain Kelantan as long as Nik Aziz was around. A further problem was that BN's loss of its historic two-thirds majority in Parliament precluded redistricting Kelantan in UMNO's favor. As an aside, Rastam said he was sure that PR leader Anwar Ibrahim was sure to be convicted in his sodomy case, citing strong evidence that Rastam was privy to. Anwar had been offered the chance to swear on the Koran that he was innocent, while his accuser had sworn on the Koran that he was telling the truth.

Nik Aziz

16. (SBU) Kelantan Chief Minister "honored teacher" ("Tok Guru") Nik Aziz enjoys a status perhaps on par with Americans' posthumous admiration of George Washington. In Kota Bharu, Teenagers' motorcycles have "we love Nik Aziz" stickers. An ethnic Indian businessman volunteered to visiting POL Counselor and POL staff that Aziz had allowed a stalled Indian temple to be completed. A local journalist

KUALA LUMP 00000828 002 OF 003

added that Aziz effectively conveys to Kelantanese that they should accept their fate on earth ("takdir") and concentrate on the hereafter -- Islamic spiritual language that UMNO can't counter. Aziz, who has held political office continuously for 42 years, is also admired because he lives not in the Chief Minister's mansion -- now open to tourists -- but in his modest home in a poor part of Kota Bharu, next to the mosque and school where he started his career as an Imam.

17. (SBU) Outside observers find Aziz' Islamic initiatives in Kelantan -- such as the separate grocery lines for men and women (posted but often ignored) and his recommendation that the lights be kept on in movie theaters) somewhat comical, but it appears that Kelantanese, and many conservative Muslims in Malaysia, hang on his every word. He also plays political hardball, a journalist told us, having pressured all PAS representatives to sign an Islamic oath ("bayat") pledging, on pain of apostasy that would carry over to future generations, not to defect from the party after the 2004 elections, when UMNO came close to gaining control of the state. Aged 78 and having suffered a heart attack, he has no clear successor.

PAS Nationally

18. (SBU) PAS MP Wan Ibrahim frequently cited Aziz in commenting on PAS's outlook for the next national election. Asked about speculation that PAS would reach out to UMNO, as some in the PAS national leadership reportedly want to do (ref A), Rahim answered immediately that such a move was impossible as long as Aziz was around. Instead, Rahim said, Aziz (and Rahim) favors a "realistic" approach for PAS, continuing to work within the Peoples Alliance (PR) opposition coalition to win the next national elections. Rahim said PAS's strength was its ability to attract Malays because of its unchallenged Muslim credentials and appeal to non-Malays because of a track record, including in Kelantan, of tolerance. An example of PAS's appeal to non-Malays was the large PAS victory in mixed-race Kota Raja district in Selangor in March 2008. By contrast, UMNO was trapped in a

model that required it to defend Malay privileges and alienate non-Malays. Rahim said that BN feared PR's strength, and had offered PAS the chief minister slots in four states besides Kelantan (Selangor, Terengganu, Kedah and Perak) after the March 2008 elections if it would refrain from joining PR.

¶9. (SBU) Rahim could not be pinned down about the apparent contrasts within the PR opposition coalition, which includes the secular Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Peoples Justice Party (PKR) along with PAS, which officially favors establishment of an Islamic state. Establishing an Islamic state was a religious aspiration inherent for Islam, Rahim said, but PAS had learned the Islamic state was not to be when it contested 98 out of 177 parliamentary seats in 1986, losing so badly that it lost USD 70,000 worth of in deposits for failing to capture the minimum one-eighth of the vote in many constituencies. PAS needed to work with a coalition, but he described the PR coalition as "loose...nothing is in writing." Nor would the planned December PR convention lead to defining what PR stood for; it would be a "pure public relations exercise." His implicit message was that the PR coalition was a vehicle to help PAS increase its influence.

Border Issues

¶10. On October 6, we also traveled to the nearby Malaysia-Thailand border villages of Rantau Panjang and Pengkalon Kubur, in the former case observing steady streams of people crossing the narrow (10-15 meters wide) Golok river in both directions aboard small ferry boats without any immigration formalities. Most passengers were women carrying grocery bags; rice is said to be relatively inexpensive on the Thai side, while cooking oil was prominently for sale on the Malaysian side. There was also steady vehicle traffic across the bridges in each village after brief document checks. Kelantan police officials did not agree to our request for a meeting to discuss border issues. Our interlocutors in Kota Bharu said the intermittent violence in southern Thailand did not worry the Kelantanese. However, on October 7, according to news reports, three bomb blasts on the Thai side of the border in Sungai Golok killed two persons and injured 12.

¶11. (C) Asked about previous reports (ref A) that Burmese refugees were being trafficked at the Malaysian-Thailand border, PAS Parliamentarian Rahim said he had not heard anything about the problem lately and believed it had stopped. Our other interlocutors did not have any response

KUALA LUMP 00000828 003 OF 003

to the question.
KEITH